



Ever After High



Ashlynn Ella's
Story

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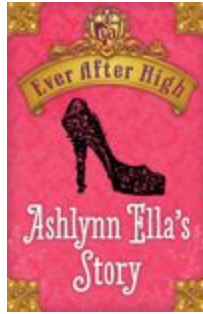
Ashlynn Ella's Story

by Shannon Hale



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Ashlynn Ella woke up at dawn to birds singing at her window. But to Ashlynn's ears, it wasn't just tweeting; it was a conversation.

"Good morning! The sun is up! Wake up! Time to eat," said the birds.

"Good morning," Ashlynn said back.

There was a clink of glass slippers against the wood floor, and then her mother appeared in the doorway. She had the same strawberry-blond hair and green eyes as Ashlynn. Her mother was already dressed, but Ashlynn didn't notice the clothes she was wearing. As always, her eyes went right to the glass slippers. Oh, how she loved those shoes.

"Chores, dear!" her mother said, leaning over to kiss the top of Ashlynn's head. "And then you should pack."

"Yes, Mother!"

Ashlynn washed her face, put on an apron, and then opened wide the door to her shoe closet. This princess wouldn't care if she wore a burlap sack every day, so long as she had dozens of footwear choices. Today she settled on a pair of strappy teal wedges and went to start breakfast. Even though her father's grand house came fully stocked with servants, her mother believed in good, solid, character-forming chores. After all, Ashlynn would inherit her mother's story and become the next Cinderella someday, and there would be lots of floors to mop and hearths to sweep before her Happily Ever After.

She bounded down the polished wood stairs and into the bustling kitchen, warmed by south-facing windows. The ecofriendly mansion was built from wood carefully harvested from the surrounding forest. The only things that excited her father, the king, more than a good ball were sustainable logging practices.

Ashlynn prepared a vegan porridge topped with wild blueberries and took a bowl upstairs.

"Breakfast, Auntie Step!" Ashlynn said, knocking before entering her aunt's room.

Auntie Step was brushing her hair at her vanity. She looked Ashlynn over and sniffed. "A proper porridge is made with milk."

"I suppose so," Ashlynn said, though she never cooked with animal products.

As usual, Auntie Step didn't say thank you, but Ashlynn didn't mind. The stepsister had had to be mean and nasty in Cinderella's story, and Ashlynn supposed that kind of meanness and nastiness didn't wear off, even after The End.

Still, having Auntie Step visit was good practice. After all, one day Ashlynn would have her own unkind stepsisters to put up with in the story, which would happen after her mother's untimely death, but Ashlynn didn't want to think about that part.

After cleaning up the dishes and watering the flowers, Ashlynn returned to her room. She was leaving tomorrow for boarding school at Ever After High, and she hadn't even begun to pack. Perhaps, she admitted to herself, she had been hesitating just a little. While the other princesses at school shopped, chatted, and partied, Ashlynn worked at her after-school job at the Glass Slipper Shoe Store. And in her rare free moments, she usually fled to the nearest forest, just to feel like herself again.

This would be her second year at school, and so far she had yet to make a human friend who wanted to explore the outdoors with her. At least she had her pack of woodland pals.

Still, it was useless to waste another moment. She *must* pack. No sooner had she opened her closet and taken out a dress than a cottontail came hopping into her room.

"Ashlynn!" he said. "*My sisters are being so mean! And I can't find any clover blossoms! And, and...*" His fuzzy white nose trembled even harder, and he shook with a rabbit sob.

"Oh dear! I'll come help, of course," Ashlynn replied.

Those bunnies. Always so much drama! She supposed that was what happened when one lived in a hole with fifty brothers and sisters. Ashlynn looked at the dress in her hands. It was a hand-me-down coral silk from her mother, and she had been about to hem it so she could pack it.

Ashlynn leaned out her window and waved to a raccoon, who was sniffing around the rock garden hunting for snails. "Rocky, dear, could you be a darling and finish this for me?"

"*Certainly,*" said Rocky, leaping onto her sill and into her room. He sat on a chair and threaded a needle. The raccoon had nimble fingers. She gave him a quick kiss on his furry forehead and capered out the door after the bunny.

The woods were alive with voices.

“Seeds! Seeds! Seeds!”

“I smell a worm. Mmm, juicy worm.”

“Scuttle, scuttle, scuttle....”

Ashlynn smiled. So many friends.

But this morning, so many of her friends were in need. As soon as she finished helping with some sibling bonding at the rabbit warren, a trio of squirrels needed an arbitrator in the matter of whose cache of acorns was buried under a leaf. Then there was even more bunny drama, followed by a deer who couldn't find her favorite backscratching tree. Every time Ashlynn was about to go home to pack, yet another animal emergency fell into her lap.

It was late afternoon when she followed cries for help to a fallen bird's nest. The mother robin was hopping around, shouting, *“My babies! My babies!”*

Three baby robins sat on the forest floor. They were uninjured from the fall, but they didn't yet have enough wing feathers to fly and would be easy prey there. Ashlynn sat down, placing the birds in her lap, and tried to mend the nest. It was a mess.

“Don't worry,” she told the mother bird. *“I'll work at it all night if I have to.”*

“Boy in the woods,” a wren called from a tree.

“A large boy walking under the oak tree,” a starling sang.

“I smell a boy,” a hedgehog grumbled. *“He smells like pine.”*

Whoever this guy was, he didn't make a sound, but his every step was narrated by a chorus of woodland creatures. Ashlynn didn't look, just listened.

“Boy with a birdhouse.”

“A tall boy, hanging a birdhouse in a tree.”

Hanging up a birdhouse? What unexpected kindness! If he wanted to be unseen, Ashlynn would pretend she didn't know he was there. It was darling, really, how stealthy he thought he was being. Actually, his steps *were* soundless. But when a girl can understand animal voices, it's hard to sneak up on her in the woods.

“Birdhouse!” said the mother bird, flapping away. *“It's perfect! It's perfect!”*

Ashlynn wanted desperately to peek. What did this boy with a birdhouse look like? Did she know him, perhaps? Certainly, it *couldn't* be one of those

huntsmen who were always filling the woods with traps.

Ashlynn shivered.

She respected the kind of hero who was quiet and humble, who served for the pleasure of helping, not for the recognition. Her heart beat harder just at the thought of such a guy. And she couldn't help but turn around.

But the mysterious woodsman was gone.

Ashlynn sighed. That was for the best. Ashlynn was a princess, set to inherit a Happily Ever After. She was destined to marry some dashing, ball-planning prince, though she didn't yet know which one. It didn't really matter—all the princes she'd met seemed vaguely the same to her. They gelled their hair, whitened their teeth, and expected girls to swoon because of their smiles. And they most certainly didn't spend their free time roughing it in the deep woods making birdhouses.

She was absolutely forbidden from daydreaming about any nonprinces. No reason to even make the acquaintance of a friendly boy who builds houses for nest-less birds.

Ashlynn picked up the baby birds and placed them in the birdhouse, which had been cunningly made from branches, bark, and honeycomb. Whoever that boy was, he was incredibly skilled. Not to mention soft-hearted.

"Good night!" birds began to sing.

Good night? It was evening already, and she still hadn't mended her hand-me-downs or packed any clothes! Oh dear, she would be up all night now. Ashlynn picked up her mud-stained skirts and ran back home. She burst into her room.

Immediately her dress and apron sizzled into rags, a curse that struck anytime she was late—which was often. But she smiled anyway because her room was teeming with creatures.

There were the brother and sister bunnies, the doe with an itchy back, a stag with a pair of stockings stuck in his antlers, three raccoons with mending needles, several birds, and the trio of squirrels, still bickering over acorns while fitting shoes into her trunk.

Her closet was empty, her clothing trunk packed. The animals looked at her with shy, self-satisfied smiles.

"Thank you," Ashlynn said.

They gave her various pecks, nudges, and nuzzles before leaving.

Ashlynn's heart was still strangely pounding after the encounter in the woods. She shut her curtains, locked the door, and lifted her mattress, pulling out last year's Sustainable Logging Lumberjack Calendar. She flipped through the pages and sighed. Yes, the lumberjacks had chiseled jaws, warm eyes, and broad shoulders beneath flannel shirts. But it was the bios that made her heart go flutter-flap:

Mr. April enjoys roasting vegetables over a fire and the company of kind, modest young women.

For every tree Mr. May takes down with a single ax stroke, he plants three seedlings with his own callused hands.

When Mr. September isn't hard at work lumberjacking, he loves to take his pet dogs on long walks.

Ashlynn knew she shouldn't be looking at lumberjack calendars any more than she should be making friends with birdhouse-making guys. As the next Cinderella, she would have to marry whichever fairytale prince ended up in her story.

But she couldn't help making a small, secret wish that her assigned prince might be the kind who would grab her hand and run off into the woods—build a tree house with her or lie back and watch the stars come out through the canopy.

The kind of person who would make a birdhouse for a family of robins.

She didn't care about a fancy palace and loads of dresses. Just a cozy cottage somewhere—perhaps with an attached two-story, fully stocked shoe shed. And a guy with dirt under his fingernails and goodness in his heart.

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Shannon Hale knew at age ten that it was her destiny to become a writer. She has quested deep into fairy tales in such enchanting books as *The Goose Girl*, *Book of a Thousand Days*, *Rapunzel's Revenge*, and Newbery Honor recipient *Princess Academy*. With the princely and valiant writer Dean Hale, Shannon coauthored four charming children, who are free to follow their own destinies. Just so long as they get to bed on time.

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